

The Tapes Are Disappearing
Sherry Miller Hocking

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"Without a consideration of the contributions of video pioneers...any history of American television, not to mention recent American social history, will be incomplete, distorted."

— Deirdre Boyle, historian and educator, testifying at a 1996 hearing for the Report on the Study of American Television and Video.

THE TAPES ARE DISAPPEARING

Beginning as early as 1965, with the establishment by the National Endowment for the Arts of the American Film Institute with its mission of preserving our heritage of film and television, the need for saving our moving image works has been clear. Also during that decade, representatives of moving image archives originally known as the Film and Television Archives Advisory Committee (F/TAAC) began to meet. By 1990 F/TAAC changed its name to the Association of Moving Image Archivists (AMIA) which today serves as an important resource for preservation information. While progress has been made on some fronts, notably in the preservation of popular commercial film and television programming, independently produced video works remain largely neglected and in need of rescue.

In the late 1960s the introduction of relatively low-cost, portable video production equipment allowed us to create videotapes outside the strictures of the commercial broadcast world. Although we took up the new technology with enthusiasm, and created many works of originality and passion, we failed to carefully consider the lifespan of the tapes themselves, or the place of the work and its practitioners in history. Indeed, we celebrated the aesthetics of “real time”, of “electronic” art, and took pride in the fact that the tools allowed us to erase and re-record over the tapes many times. The democratic and egalitarian spirit of the age called into serious question the concept of the precious art object.

Videotape was never intended to be an archival medium; while the manufacturers themselves disagreed about the lifespan of videotape, all agreed it was finite. As videotapes age, they begin to break down physically; as deterioration progresses, the tapes cannot be played back and the images are unreadable. In some cases the tapes will fail catastrophically. The collective memory of our culture, and the history of independent electronic media reside on a medium which was never intended to be permanent.

Early production work was done by individual artists, and by groups and collectives, often with the support of public agencies or private foundations. Small media arts and cultural organizations now find themselves in the role of de-facto stewards of collections of aging tapes; significant collections are also held by individuals, who also may lack the resources and support to maintain them. The collections themselves are located in a wide variety of places around the country including individual homes, libraries, museums, media arts centers, artists' spaces, universities, non-profit distributors and public television stations. The storage and care the work receives is often inadequate. The demands the collections place on smaller organizations far exceed the

financial resources available, or the staff and expertise required to address the problems the tapes pose.

Because we have no union catalog, preservation work may not be performed efficiently or effectively. It is difficult to determine how many copies of an original independent work exist, who holds the best surviving copy, or what the condition of each copy might be. Slim resources may be wasted in remastering efforts which duplicate that already done by others, or preserve a copy which not the best of the extant copies.

These independent works are educational, cultural and historic resources which illuminate our shared past. Because many of the tapes are unplayable, the work is not accessible. Scholars, historians and others are unable to view these tapes which represent a major cultural and historical legacy. The preservation and increased accessibility of these tapes will advance research into our culture and society, will enhance educational scholarship and provide enriched public programming opportunities.

Each year more tapes deteriorate, some irreparably. The obsolete equipment used to create the work and necessary to its viewing and preservation is now difficult to find and almost impossible to maintain. Many early practitioners have moved on; many early groups disbanded long ago. Memories are hazy, and paper records lost or destroyed.

Thirty-five years later we find that our field is in danger of misplacing its own history. Our society is in danger of losing these cultural and historical documents.

WHAT WE'VE DONE

While much remains to do, much has been accomplished. Throughout the decade of the 1980s many organizations and individuals engaged in efforts to preserve collections. Among them were the Andy Warhol Foundation, Anthology Film Archives, Bay Area Video Coalition, Downtown Community TV Center, Electronic Arts Intermix, Experimental TV Center, Intermedia Arts of Minnesota, The Kitchen, Museum of Modern Art, Pacific Film Archives, Video Data Bank, Tony Conrad, Bob Harris, Woody and Steina Vasulka and many others. Under the leadership of Debby Silverfine, then the Director of the Electronic Media and Film Program at The New York State Council on the Arts, a support category for preservation activities was established.

In 1995 Bay Area Video Coalition opened the first non-profit remastering facility for ½" open reel tape, under the direction of Luke Hones. Arthur Tsuchiya, then in the Media Program at the national Endowment for the Arts, was instrumental in advancing the cause of preservation of independent video.

Important publications have included Deirdre Boyle's *Video Preservation: Securing the Future* (1993); *Study of the Preservation of Television and Video* (1997) published by the Library of Congress; *Magnetic Media Preservation Sourcebook* (1998) edited by Mona Jimenez and Liss Platt and published by Media Alliance; *Playback: A Preservation Primer for Video* (1998) edited by Sally Jo Fifer, Tamara Gould, Luke Hones, Debbie Hess Norris, Paige Ramey and Karen Weiner, and published by Bay Area Video Coalition.

Organizations were formed and meetings convened. The *Symposium on Video Preservation* (1991) was hosted by the Museum of Modern Art and organized by Media Alliance and the New York State Council on the Arts; BAVC held *Playback 1996: Video Preservation Roundtable*; Experimental TV Center organized *Video History: Making Connections* (1998) a conference concerning the links between early media history and contemporary practice, held at Syracuse University; in 1999 Independent Media Arts Preservation (IMAP) was established, with support from the New York State Council on the Arts and the Rockefeller Foundation; BAVC organized *TechArcheology: A Symposium on Installation Art Conservation* (2000) held at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and supported by the Getty Foundation; *Preserving the Immaterial: A Conference on Variable Media* (2001) was held at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, focusing on radical new solutions to the contested issues of new media preservation.

A NEW PROJECT

And the work continues. In late May 2002 the symposium *Looking Back/Looking Forward* will invite 45 artists, media arts staff, conservators, and technical experts to focus on the physical preservation of independent electronic media. A half-day will be devoted to an analysis of BAVC's remastering facility, led by Luke Hones, Heather Weaver and Kacey Koeberer. Luke Hone's manuscript, "Reel to Real: BAVC's Remastering Model, a Case Study", concerning the history and configuration of the facility, will be available on the Experimental Television Center's Video History Project web site, along with other historic preservation texts. Other sessions include The Economics of Physical Preservation, with discussions of projects by Electronic Arts Intermix, Video Data Bank, and V Tape. Mona Jimenez will briefly summarize the different points of view in the archival and media arts community concerning formats. *Assessing a Collection for Preservation* led by Sarah Stauderman of the Smithsonian Institution will present a summary of the questions archivists and conservators typically ask when prioritizing a list of works from a collection for possible remastering. Media preservation also encompasses artists' instruments and tools and paper ephemera; models developed by the Daniel Langlois Foundation, the Art and Science Laboratory directed by Steina and Woody Vasulka and the Electronic Music Foundation, directed by Joel Chadabe, will be presented. A final session will be devoted to targeted discussions regarding strategic planning for the future, including the possibility of an East coast remastering facility.

The symposium is organized by the Experimental Television Center (ETC) in association with Independent Media Arts Preservation (IMAP), Bay Area Video Coalition and the Electronic Media Specialty Group of the AIC (American Institute for the Conservation of Artistic and Historic Works). *Looking Back/Looking Forward* is hosted by the Downtown Community Television Center and is made possible with public funds from the Electronic Media and Film Program of the NYS Council on the Arts, and assistance from IMAP and Dave Jones Design. The symposium is organized by Sherry Miller Hocking, Assistant Director of the Experimental Television Center, and independent consultant Mona Jimenez. Working reports will be posted on the Center's Video History site.

PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

We face many problems. As we craft solutions, we need to forge partnerships with a varied constituency. We should engage professionals working in other media in extended conversations, to identify models which may be successfully transposed to the media arts field. Collaborative

strategies will help us make effective use of scarce resources. Successful proposals will sharpen our vision and deepen our commitment.

The Recommendations for Safeguarding and Preserving the American Television and Video Heritage, from *A Study of the Current State of American Television and Video Preservation*, published by the Library of Congress in 1997 provides a national plan. The recommendations offered in this report, as well as by other preservation organizations such as AMIA and IMAP include:

- Acknowledging our responsibilities in caring for these materials
- Research into storage archives for video
- Maintenance and cataloging of key archives, using compatible templates
- Sharing of information concerning collections to prevent duplication of preservation efforts
- Research into need for additional remastering facilities
- Research into archival and technical matters affecting moving images
- Establishment of additional public and educational programs to raise public awareness
- Development of more coalitions to invite into the conversation those who have not been involved – marginalized groups, small organizations and individuals
- Increased support from a broader base of funders

RESOURCES

There are many resources available on the Web for those interested in moving image preservation. Here are a few places to begin -

Experimental Television Center Video History Project

<http://www.experimentaltvcenter.org/history/index.html>

The Center in 1994 organized the Video History Project, a multi-project approach to reclaiming our past. The Video History Website is a dynamic vehicle for the creation and dissemination of an inclusive media history, encouraging participation by a wide range of people including early pioneers as well as contemporary practitioners. The structure depends on 9 databases which contain a total of about 2500 records relating to people, tools, groups, and an extensive bibliography. The Preservation area contains several resources. "Video Preservation: The Basics", written by Mona Jimenez and Sherry Miller Hocking, is a primer on electronic media preservation with information on topics ranging from storage to cleaning, copyright to remastering, as well as glossaries and extensive links. "Reel to Real: A Case Study of BAVC's Remastering Facility" by Luke Hones, and well as several early texts on preservation are also available.

Association of Moving Image Archivists www.amianet.org

AMIA is a non-profit professional association established to advance the field of moving image archiving by fostering cooperation among individuals and organizations concerned with the collection, preservation, exhibition and use of moving image materials. AMIA provides a Listserv for active exchange of ideas and help; an annual conference as well as workshops and public programs; and newsletter.

IMAP www.imappreserve.org

IMAP is a service, education, and advocacy consortium, organized in 1999 to ensure the preservation of independent electronic media for cultural and educational use by future generations. IMAP is especially interested in supporting the preservation of works reflecting the early history of independent media. IMAP participates in national and international forums on preservation serves as a central place for information on issues of preservation. Through technical

assistance, training, and by developing replicable models (like the IMAP MARC for FileMaker Cataloging Template), IMAP helps non-profit organizations and artists/producers care for and preserve their electronic media collections.

The Image Permanence Institute at Rochester Institute of Technology www.rit.edu/~661www1
The Institute is a University-based nonprofit research laboratory devoted to scientific research in the preservation of visual and other forms of recorded information. IPI offers research, testing, publications, consulting and educational seminars.

Conservation OnLine <http://palimpsest.stanford.edu/>

A project of the Preservation Department of Stanford University Libraries, this site offers a full text library of conservation information, covering a wide spectrum of topics of interest to those involved with the conservation of library, archives and museum materials.

“The American television and video heritage is now at a crossroads. One direction leads toward catastrophic losses of film and videotape, with the likely exception of studio and network programs in corporate archives that can be recycled for new income. Another direction leads toward the managed preservation of extant television and video materials that bear an important relationship to American history and culture regardless of their reuse potential or monetary value.”

- *Television and Video Preservation 1997: A Study of the Current State of American Television and Video Preservation*, Volume 1, page 123

The **EXPERIMENTAL TELEVISION CENTER** was founded in 1971, an outgrowth of a media access program established by Ralph Hocking at Binghamton University in 1969. The **Residency Program** (deadlines July 15 and December 15) offers self-directed creative residency opportunities to media artists from around the world, to support the creation of new works. The **Grants Program** offers **Finishing Funds** (deadline March 15) to NYS's media artists, and **Presentation Funds** (on-going deadline) to organizations in the State for in-person appearances by film and media makers. We also provide **Technical Assistance** (quarterly deadlines) to media organizations in NYS for a variety of needs. **Video History Project** is an on-going research initiative which documents the emergence of video art and community television, and makes resources available on the Web. The Center offers **sponsorship** for artists' projects, providing support and fiscal and administrative management services. We also serve as an information resource for artists. The Center's programs are supported by the contributions of artists, by public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts, by The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, the State-Wide Challenge Grant Program, and the Media Action Grant program of Media Alliance. Corporate assistance provided by Dave Jones Design and Black Hammer Productions. Applications and much additional information is available on the web @ www.experimental-tvcenter.org.